René Guénon and the *Kali-yuga*

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(*translated from the French by Deborah Bell*)

What is the Kali-yuga?

The Kali-yuga signifies, in Hindu mythology, the fourth age of mankind, equivalent to the Greek Age of Iron, in which we find ourselves at the present day. This period is part of a very elaborate theory of cosmic cycles, which only appeared relatively late in the history of Brahmanic speculation. Its birth was contemporary with what Coomaraswamy called "Hinduism properly so-called".[1] Even if some outlines of a similar nature do exist in Jain and Buddhist literature, it is in fact in the epic of the *Mahābhārata* (around the 3rd century BC) that this theory is first described in detail. We then find it again, around the beginning of the Christian era, mentioned in the *Laws of Manu* (*Mānava-dharma-śāstra*), before being taken up and elaborated on endlessly in the immense mythological literature of the *Purānas* (from the 1st to the 8th century).

Here, then, is a brief summary. The basic temporal unit is the *mahāyuga*[2] comprising four divisions (*yuga*) of decreasing length in the ratio 4: 3: 2: 1, leading to a progressive and increasingly rapid decline in the conditions of earthly life on both the material and spiritual plane. This cycle repeats itself indefinitely according to the metaphysical principle that manifestation is co-eternal with the Principle but that, because it remains distinct from it, it is subject to periodic destruction and renewal. With each renewal, humanity experiences a new perfect age (*krita-yuga*) before "a

[1] "In centuries preceding the Christian era, when the fusion of races in India had already advanced, the religion of India passed through the greatest crises and underwent the most profound changes. Vedic ritual, indeed, has survived in part up to the present day; but the religious outlook of medieval and modern India is so profoundly different from that of the Vedic period, as known to us from the extant literature, that we cannot apply to both a common designation: medieval and modern Hinduism is one thing, Vedic Brahmanism another. The change is twofold, at once inward and spiritual, and outward and formal." (Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas*, Smithsonian Institute, 1928).

[2] The confusion Guénon made between the *mahāyuga* and the *manvantara* will be discussed in the fourth part of this article.

gradual movement away from the principle, which is necessarily inherent in any process of manifestation," to use Guénon's formulation,[3] inevitably leads the world to a new catastrophe, in the etymological sense of an "overthrowing".

Seventy-one *mahāyuga* then make up a *manvantara*. A *manvantara* is distinguished from a *mahāyuga* due to the appearance in it of a new prototypical man, a Manu, a sort of Adam, who gives a distinct "colouring" to the corresponding series of 71 *mahāyuga*. 14 *manvantara* in turn form a *kalpa*, or "day of Brahmā".

A day of Brahmā, or *kalpa*, theoretically contains a thousand *mahāyuga*. But since 71 x 14 only makes 994, the equivalent of six *mahāyuga* are missing for it to be truly complete. This remainder is therefore divided into 15 intermediate periods (*samdhi*) which are inserted between the 14 *manvantara* (= 2 + 13, the first and last of these periods framing the series of 14). The day of Brahmā is followed by a "night of Brahmā" of equal length during which the god "rests", like the Creator of Genesis on the seventh day. Then the same process begins again indefinitely. 360 of these nictemeral cycles make a "year of Brahmā" whose life is limited to 100 years. Then a new Brahmā is born and so on... The *Śiva-purāna* goes even further by saying that one life of Brahmā is equal to one day of Rudra (= Śiva), thus potentially opening the way to ever more gigantic cycles.

Concerning the duration of a *mahāyuga* and, logically, that of the cycles encompassing it, two stages must be taken into account. The *Mahābhārata* gives the following numbers: 4,800 years for the first age (*krita-yuga*), or 4,000 years + two *samdhi* of 400 years each; 3,600 (3,000 + 2 x 300) years for the second (*tretā-yuga*); 2,400 (2,000 + 2 x 200) for the third (*dvāpara-yuga*); and 1,200 (1,000 + 2 x 100) for the fourth (*kali-yuga*), which makes a total of 12,000 years for the whole *mahāyuga*.

However it seems that these numbers soon appeared to be much too "small" in a place like India where astronomy, since the Vedic era, had been very much practiced. The *Laws of Manu* "corrected" them by estimating that they were, in fact, really divine years (*devānām yuga*) and multiplied them by 360 compared to the human

[3] *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times*, Sophia Perennis, 1995, p. 3

norm.[4] This rectification is in accordance with the fact that there is on earth a place where a single day and a single night actually lasts 360 "ordinary days": this is the pole, which already signified, in the *Vedas*, the first abode of the gods. This calculation was ratified by the Puranic tradition with the result that a *mahāyuga* would last 4,320,000 years (= 12,000 x 360) and, consequently, the *kali-yuga,* which represents a tenth of that, would be 432,000 years.[5]

Crisis of the Modern World

It is known that René Guénon met a Hindu master in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century, whose identity has remained mysterious. It was through this person that he was introduced to the Hindu tradition far beyond the realm of academia. Several books, notably the *General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* (1921) and *Studies in Hinduism* (a collection of articles published over several years), attest to the authenticity of this source. They also mark a clear "divergence" with "official orientalism", and even with the "German influence", whose limits and flaws Guénon denounced in the concluding chapters of the first of these titles. However, it was in his masterly *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta* (1925), essentially based on a precise exegesis of the *Māndukya Upanishad*, that he would show the full extent of his genius for expounding the metaphysical content of this fundamental text, in the wake of the great Śankarācarya (7th century) and the Vedānta school. This personal and early contact with Indian civilization would be decisive for him and would become, so to speak, the cornerstone of all his work. His conception of the "multiple states of being", of the fundamental unity of all "true" and "orthodox" traditions, of the role of a universal language that he recognized in symbolism and of course the cyclical principle of the becoming of the world, clearly flow from it.

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[4] Faced with a similar difficulty, both Christianity and Islam came up with a different multiplication: "Do not forget that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter, 3, 8) and "One day with God, is in truth like a thousand years according to your way of counting" (Quran, 22, 47; 32, 5). This therefore means that a "divine year" is equivalent in these two traditions to 360,000 "human years" (360 x 1000), that is to say a thousand times more than in India.

[5] For more details, see our work, *Le kali-yuga ou l'ambivalence de l'âge sombre*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2024.

However, there was still little reference, except in an allusive manner, to the doctrine of the four ages and the Kali-yuga in these early writings. It was not until *Crisis of the Modern World* (1927), and then *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times* (1945) that we begin to grasp the full extent of the importance Guénon would give to this teaching from Hinduism in his critique of the current world and the analysis of its "anomalies". The first chapter of *Crisis of the Modern World*, entitled "The Dark Age", actually begins with this theme, without going into detail about the numerical aspects of the Puranic tradition. We will return to this last point in the fourth part of this exposition based on his article "Some Remarks on Cosmic Cycles" which was published about ten years after this work (1937).

We have been in the Kali-yuga for more than six thousand years, he says in the first chapter of the *Crisis*, and this means that "the truths which were formerly within reach of all men have become more and more hidden and inaccessible; those who possess them grow gradually less and less numerous, and, though the treasure of 'non-human' wisdom that was before the ages, can never be lost, it becomes enveloped in ever more impenetrable veils, which hide it from men's sight and make it extremely difficult to discover. This is why we meet everywhere, under various symbols with the same theme of something which has been lost, at least to all appearances and so far as the outer world is concerned, and which those who aspire to true knowledge must find again; but it is also stated that what is thus hidden will become visible once more at the end of the cycle, which, because of the continuity that binds all things together, will at the same time, be the beginning of a new cycle" (*The Crisis of the Modern World*, Indica, 2021, p. 15).

Now this synthetic description of the Kali-yuga can certainly be understood on two very different levels and it is more than likely that the majority of readers of *The Crisis of the Modern World* will have spontaneously related it to the contemporary situation, given the general theme of the book. But if, according to Hindu tradition, the Kali-yuga has indeed lasted for more than five thousand years—and not six, if we stick to the estimate of the *Sūrya-siddhānta* which will be discussed later—the representation made of it here, with both the idea of a loss and a continuity based on a restoration, does not date from a recent commentary, nor from the beginning of the

Kali-yuga. It actually dates from the time of the writing of the *Mahābhārata*, that is, at the earliest, from the 3rd or 4th century BC, since there is no mention of cycles in Vedic literature, including in the ancient *Upanishads*.

The Kali-yuga is therefore an "invention" of the *Mahābhārata* and there is no evidence to suppose that anyone in India was previously aware of living in such a well-defined phase of degeneration, even though this age was supposed to have lasted for a long time. We will leave aside here any speculation on the origin of the doctrine of the four ages, which appears so suddenly in several Indo-European civilizations, as Dumézil has shown. This would take us too far from the subject and is beyond our competence. Let us nevertheless underline the best known and oldest case, to which we have already alluded. This is that of Greece, which, to our knowledge, seems to have been the first to have widely propagated an articulated representation of the decline of humanity with the Hesiodic description of the ages of gold, silver, bronze and iron (8th century BC).[6] For it is not impossible that the Greek influence transported to India at the time of Alexander the Great played a role in the composition of the Indian epics.

In any case, what we wish to say is that the analysis proposed by Guénon in the passage we have just quoted is practically a paraphrase of what Krishna teaches Arjuna during his initiation in the famous dialogue of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which, let us recall, is located at the heart of the *Mahābhārata*: "I myself taught this imperishable yoga to Vivasvat (the Sun) who revealed it to Manu (the first man) and Manu transmitted it to Ikshvāku (the first king of the solar dynasty). It is through this line of transmission that the royal prophets *(rājarshaya*) knew it. But, O Arjuna, this yoga has been lost over time. It is this same yoga that I teach you today; you are my devoted friend and such is the supreme secret" (4, 1-3). Certainly Krishna speaks here of an "imperishable (or immutable) yoga" (*yoga avyaya*) and not of the *sanātana dharma* (the perennial order, the primordial Tradition) to which Guénon refers

[6] The age of heroes that Hesiod mentions further in *Works and Days* is in reality a subdivision of the Iron Age, as suggested by the fact that it is not associated with a metal like the others. This is the age of the Trojan War, which symbolically corresponds to the war of Kurukshetra recounted in the *Mahābhārata*.

explicitly in his *Studies in Hinduism*; but the two terms are perfectly synonymous in the epic. The avatar then clearly alludes to a loss of this knowledge, to a break in the transmission, due to the corrosive nature of time. Finally, he describes his message as a "supreme secret" (*rahasya uttama*), which is equivalent to the institution of an "esoteric" path—the term *rahasya* is often rendered thus in translations of śivaïte texts—and the very transmission of this "secret" to "a devoted friend" (*bhakta, sakhi*) is nothing other than an initiation. In a sense, this "hidden" thing, to use Guénon's terms, had already "been made visible", more than two thousand years before "the end of the cycle", to an elite of initiates before being received and accepted by all Hindus.

In the same chapter on the "Dark Age", Guénon makes another essential point. He states: "It is a strange fact, and one which appears never to have been given the attention it deserves, that the strictly 'historical' period, [...], stretches back exactly to the 6th century before the Christian era, as though there were at that point, a barrier in time impossible to surmount by the methods of investigation at the disposal of ordinary research" (*ibid*., p. 18). Now, it should be noted that the four most recent "religions" in the world today, namely, in chronological order, Buddhism, Hinduism (in the restricted sense of this term defined by Coomarawamy), Christianity and Islam, were born after the appearance of this barrier. The Kali-yuga is not without its own modifications and, like all previous cycles, it is itself divided into several minor cycles, punctuated by as many periodic adjustments. The case of Buddhism being a little different,[7] it is important to stress the fact that Hinduism, Christianity and Islam distance themselves from the religions that preceded them by the introduction of an eschatological consideration,

[7] We know that Guénon initially questioned the orthodoxy of Buddhism before changing his mind under the influence of Coomaraswamy. But this indeed is the traditional position of Brahmanism, which had to fight this new religion on its own territory, "at the cost of its own transformation into Hinduism", as Michel Angot summarized (*L'Inde classique*, Les Belles Lettres, 2001, p.45). Each new religion corrects (or modifies) in its own way, and not without good cyclical reasons, the one that preceded it, as Christianity did in relation to Judaism, or as Islam did in relation to Christianity and Judaism. We need to overcome these quarrels of form in order to accept that the orthodoxy of the previous religion can retain, as is often the case, its own validity.

crucial to their economy.[8] In previous eras, rites and sacrifices were all dependent on an origin myth. As Coomaraswamy says in relation to the myth, central to the *Vedas*, of Indra and the dragon Vritra: "The sacrifice where 'Slayer and Dragon, sacrificer and victim are of one mind behind the scenes' is 'obligatory' since 'we must do what the Gods did first'" (*Hinduism and Buddhism*, Philosophical Library New York, 1949, pp.6, 7 and 19). The emergence of "eschatological" religions now having to face the end of time[9] is undoubtedly the most salient feature of this cyclical turning point after the barrier of the 6th century BC so opportunely highlighted by Guénon.

To return to India and before going further in our examination of Guénon's contribution, we must emphasize again that what most fundamentally characterizes Hinduism in our eyes is precisely this new conception of time linked to the doctrine of the four ages. It indeed implies everything that definitively distinguishes it from the Vedic religion: the concept of avatars "descending"—such is the etymological meaning of the word—to earth from age to age; the birth of a teeming mythology engendering the cult of images, the construction of temples and the practice of pilgrimages that follows; the redefinition of *dharma*; the principle of an initiation and an esoteric path relativizing the caste system and, finally, this insistence on the fact that all these "new practises" are in reality an updated expression of the *sanātana dharma*. Because without this idea of a "decline over time", it is simply useless to speak of the durability of wisdom, or even of tradition as a "means of transmission", at all.

It may be objected that the constituent elements of Hinduism that we have just highlighted are essentially linked to the devotional path, *bhakti-yoga*, taught by Krishna, who considers the latter easier than the "path of the Unmanifested" (*avyaktā gati*) or path of knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*), given that "the difficulty of those whose minds are set on the Unmanifested is greater" (*Bhagavad-gītā*, 12, 5 *et seq*.). This is so because the avatar is addressing warriors, or *kshatriya*, as from now on, in the Kali-yuga, we are in a world of warfare and the urgency of the situation requires

[8] In Judaism, whose origins predate this barrier, this eschatological dimension appears in the book of Daniel, which was written at the same time as the *Mahābhārata*.
[9] Cf. *I Cor.*, 10, 11.

men to fight, whatever be the outcome, rather than to meditate. But the two paths of devotion and knowledge are not contradictory. They complement each other and the *Bhagavad-gītā* bears witness to this in its conformity with the doctrinal teachings of the *Upanishads*. That is why Śankara would make this text, with the *Upanishads* and the *Brahma-sūtra*, one of the three pillars (*prasthāna*) of Vedānta. This also means that *jñāna-yoga* has remained an integral part of the *sanātana dharma* and that it has continued to be practiced by those who are capable of it, without interruption right up until the present day. The example of Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950)—an exact contemporary of Guénon (1886-1951)!—is a striking proof of this.

The *Mahābhārata* and the immense literature of the *Purānas* (whose "canonical" number is 36!) contain innumerable descriptions of the sufferings of the Kali-yuga, especially at its end (*yugānta*). Three levels can be distinguished: the microcosmic, mesocosmic and macrocosmic. On the microcosmic level, man sees his physical capacities diminish, and his morality breaks down. On the mesocosmic or social level, we see a dissolution of the family, an abandonment of rites, a global degeneration of religion and a levelling down of castes. Finally, on the macrocosmic level, all sorts of catastrophes appear: climate disruption, earthquakes, tidal waves, forced emigrations, famines, and destruction of the natural environment, etc. At a time when most of his contemporaries still believed in the indefinite progress of humanity, the young René Guénon immediately saw where the problem lay and, with a century of hindsight, one can only note the prophetic dimension of his work, so much has the situation worsened since then, in the exact same ways that he was able to discern and show in advance. *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, which one is tempted to consider to be his testament, has become for many of its readers the most important book of the 20th century. Guénon methodically denounces, in precise terms and with implacable logic, the deleterious effects of the Kali-yuga. Nothing escapes his sagacity: the transition from quality to quantity, the growing materialism, the decline of ancient trades to the "profit" of industry, the hatred of secrecy, the damage of rationalism and scientism, the murderous action of sedentary people towards nomads prefigured by the myth of Cain and Abel, the reversal of symbols, the misdeeds of psychoanalysis, the illusion of "ordinary life", the confusion of the psychic and the spiritual and so many other things.

It is therefore on this issue of the Kali-yuga that his contribution is truly significant. No one has been better able than him to grasp the "philosophical" scope of the doctrine of the four ages and he is the first to have applied it in a conscious and systematic manner in a penetrating analysis of the current situation of the world, more than two thousand years after the luminous revelation of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Bhāgavata-purāna*, probably the latest of the collections of Puranic literature (between the 6th and 8th centuries) and the most synthetic, qualifies the four ages according to the cosmic qualities (*guna*) of the Sāmkhya, namely *sattva*, the luminous and ascending tendency, *rajas*, the passionate and expansive tendency, and *tamas*, the obscure and descending tendency. The first age is thus linked to *sattva*, the second to *rajas*, the third to a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas*, and the fourth, the Kali-yuga, to *tamas*, the complete cycle ending in a disintegration (*yuga-kshaya*) (12, 3, 26-30). Guénon dwells at length on the last two phases of the Kali-yuga which he terms "solidification" and "dissolution". Here he borrows from alchemical terms, reversing the classical formula of *solue et coagula*, which illustrates the "rearward" march of the evolution of the world well. The *Purānas* insist though, regarding the first term, on a darkening rather than on a solidification. But the two things are similar, the solidification causing a typically "tamasic" opacity. On the other hand, the term dissolution seems to correspond more clearly to Sanskrit terminology. It refers to the notion of *pralaya*, with the reservation that the *Purānas* generally use this word with reference to cycles greater than that of the four ages. But the *yuga-kshaya* is indeed, analogically speaking, a "dissolution", a *pralaya*.

The ambivalence of the Kali-yuga

If we have been able to follow Guénon's exposition so far by summarizing specifically some aspects of his debt to the Puranic teachings, we are now forced to note that there is a whole section of these which he has not developed at all. By describing the Kali-yuga as a "dark age", which he is perhaps the first to have done, he effectively takes into account only its dark aspect. But the very term Kali-yuga does not refer to

darkness, nor does it refer to the goddess Kālī (the Black), as is too often stated.[10] Kali is the number one, corresponding to the worst throw of the dice and to the duration of the Kali-yuga in relation to the previous ages, the respective length of which, as we have seen, decreases: 4, 3, 2, 1.[11] It is also the name of the eponymous demon embodied by Duryodhana in the *Mahābhārata*. In subsequent mythology he was made the son of Krodha (Anger) and Himsā (Violence) who, with his sister Durukti (Lying), fathered two sons, Bhaya (Fear) and Mrityu (Death). On the other hand, what corresponds more exactly to the "dark age" is the *krishna-yuga*, the age of Krishna since the name of the latter means the Black or the Blue-black, that is to say the Dark (Śyāma) as he is also called. However, in this case, darkness takes on a positive meaning as in the *Maitri Upanishad* which refers to the original darkness by exalting *tamas*: "Dark (*tamas*) was in reality this One in the beginning, in the supreme (Being)" (5, 2). This explains why the *Mahābhārata* describes this age as "prosperous" (*pushya-yuga*, cf. critical edition: 6, 11, 7), or even "auspicious" (*tushya-yuga*: cf. Pune edition: 6, 10, 11). It is auspicious because the age of Krishna offers the spiritual man unexpected compensations, to such an extent, the *Bhāgavata-purāna* adds, that for this reason, many sages of previous ages have regretted not being born in the Kali-yuga! (11, 5, 37-40).

Such considerations abound in the *Purānas*. It should now be understood that the thirty-six *Purānas*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Uttara-mimāmsa* (the *Ultimate Commentary*) which form the basis of the Vedānta school and a certain number of other writings, are all attributed by tradition to the sage Vyāsa who represents what Guénon calls a "collective entity" invested with an "intellectual function" (*Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta,* Sophia Perennis, 2004, p.11-12).[12] Now this

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[10]However, one reservation can be made about this. Tantrism in fact establishes a correspondence between the ten major avatars of Vishnu and the ten aspects of the Goddess (*mahāvidyā*), Kālī being invariably associated with Krishna in this game of equivalences.

[11] On the importance of the game of dice in connection with the four ages, cf. Dominique Wohlschlag, *Keys to the Mahābhārata*, Matheson Trust, 2019, ch. 11, "The game of dice and the destiny of the king".

[12] On this character, little known to Westerners, see Dominique Wohlschlag, *Aux Sources de l'hindouisme*, CH-Gollion, 2020, ch. 4, "L'hindouisme a un fondateur".

same Vyāsa, appears in the *Vishnu-purāna* (6, 2) which relates that scholars argued over in what age the least moral merit obtained the greatest reward. They therefore decided to consult the old sage in order to clarify this. Before they could even ask him a single question, they saw him plunge into the water of the Ganges and emerge exclaiming that the age of Kali was truly "excellent" (*sādhu*, from the root *SĀDH* which means "to go straight to the point, to realize"). Then he plunged into the water a second time and specified that this age was particularly beneficial for men of the fourth caste, the *śūdra*. Finally, he repeated his action a third time and declared that it was the same for women. Clearly, he had guessed the questions that these men were going to ask him. He then explained to them that the fruit of virtuous acts harvested after ten years in the first age, was obtained in one year in the second age, in one month in the third and only in one day and one night in the last.

His allusion to the *śūdra* and women immediately recalls the relationship established by Hindu tradition between the division into the four ages and the four castes. The first age is dominated by the Brahmanic "mentality". Then follows, in order, the warrior mentality, that of the *kshatriya* in the second age; the domination of the practical mentality of peasants, artisans and merchants (*vaiśya)* in the third; and finally a preponderance of the mentality of the caste of servants (*śūdra*) in the fourth. It is also said that, if in the first age, the "accomplished" age (*krita-yuga*), there was only one caste, that of the perfect "swans" (*hamsa*), at the end of time there will also only be one caste (*ekavarna*) due to a levelling down, which the current evolution of Indian society tends to confirm. Now the *Purānas* have long understood that, for this reason, the means of spiritual realization have been obliged to change over time. In the first age, the "Brahmanic" age, meditation (*dhyana*) alone allowed one to attain Deliverance. In the second age, that of the *kshatriya*, sacrifice (*yajña*) became predominant. In the third, that of the *vaiśyas*, circumambulation (*paricaryā*) takes over. This term is a synecdoche that designates a set of ritual actions, inclinations, prostrations, greetings, and various offerings, etc., performed by devotees in their worship. As we have seen above, this age, governed jointly by the qualities of *rajas* and *tamas*, is a sort of transition period between the second and the fourth. Finally, in the fourth age, invocation (*kīrtana*) becomes the central means of spiritual realization: "The Name of God, the Name of God, the Name of God alone; in the

Kali-yuga there is no, there is no, there is no other way", *Harernāma, harernāma, harernāmaiva kevalam, kalau nāstyeva, nāstyeva, nāstyeva gatir anyathā* (*Brihan-nāradīya-purāna,* 38, 126). The Name of God invoked here is Hari. But it goes without saying that God has innumerable names, mainly attributed to Vishnu, Śiva and the Goddess (Devī, Lalitā), and that all can play the same role. This is the basis of the practice of mantra which has become common to all branches of present-day Hinduism[13].

One may wonder why this simple and seemingly "minimalist" practice has become the spiritual means par excellence in a period theoretically dominated by the spirit of the fourth caste, that of the *śūdra*. It has become so because the man of the last times —and this concerns the majority of humanity as much as the elite engaged on a spiritual path—has largely lost the constitutive qualities of the first castes, respectively concentration, courage and patience (or endurance), which were formerly necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of life on earth. Humility and common sense oblige us to admit this. The path of invocation (*japa-yoga*) is therefore perceived as a special grace offered by God to the "diminished" man of the end of time.

Certainly Guénon is not insensitive to this aspect of Hindu tradition. He alludes to it in particular in his appreciation of Tantrism (see: "The fifth Veda", in: *Studies in Hinduism*) where he specifies that humanity "received, to attain its transcendent ends, facilities that were the greater, the lower its spiritual and intellectual levels sank, in order to save all who might be saved, taking into account those conditions inevitably determined by the law of the cycle" (*Studies in Hinduism*, Navrang, New Delhi, 1985, p.65). But these considerations, practically absent from the two great books he devoted to the modern world, seem to have escaped most of those who

[13] There are, from one *Purāna* to another, variations in the gradually descending list of the means to spiritual realization. Here we have followed the *Vishnu-purāna* (6, 2) because of its extensive influence. The *Bhāgavata-purāna* has the same list with matching synonyms for sacrifice and circumambulation. Note that it is only from the time of the institution of sacrifice, in the second age, that one can begin to speak of a "religion" or an "obligation" (from *ob-ligare*) in the sense defined by Coomaraswamy, quoted above. There is, in fact, neither religion nor tradition in the first age. For an in-depth examination of this Puranic teaching, cf. *Kali-yuga or the Ambivalence of the Dark Age,* ch. 4.

expanded on his reflections on the Kali-yuga. This is why it seemed good to us to devote a few lines to this subject to better understand the overall teaching of the Puranic tradition, the ontological value of which can only be distorted if we ignore this initiatory dimension.

"A Few Remarks on the Doctrine of Cosmic Cycles"

The first difficulty encountered in examining Guénon's theses on the doctrine of cycles is the confusion he made between the terms *manvantara* and *mahāyuga*, as indicated in a note at the beginning of this article. Indeed, it was impossible for us to find a text in which the sequence of the four ages was named thus; whether in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Laws of Manu* or the *Purāna*, the *manvantara* always designates a period of 71 *mahāyuga*. This terminological confusion does not *ipso facto* invalidate his *Remarks*, but it is disconcerting and explains at least partially the rejection of his theses by many orientalists.

We also do not know where Guénon gets his estimate of the beginning of the Kali-yuga as being "more than six thousand years ago", even though he states that "the starting point and the duration of the *Manvantara* [= *mahāyuga*] have always been concealed more or less carefully, either by adding or subtracting a given number of years from the real dates, or by multiplying or dividing the durations of the cyclical periods so as to conserve only their exact proportions" ("Some Remarks on the Doctrine of Cosmic Cycles", in *Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles*, Sophia Perennis, 2004, p. 6). The fact is that, since the Gupta era (4th century AD), an Indian astronomical treatise, the *Sūrya-siddhānta*, has set the beginning of the Kali-yuga as being February 18, 3102 BC, the date on which all the planets would have been in conjunction in the constellation of Aries, which places us in 5126 of this era (= 2025 AD). Now this date curiously never cited by Guénon and yet very well-known in India, played an accepted role in the creation of various Indian calendars and in all subsequent speculations on the end of the current *mahāyuga.*[14] If this date could be

[14] "This date of 3102 as the year 0 [= 1!] of the Kali-Yuga was accepted by all; and from it the calculations of Aryabhata and Varāha Mihira for the solar and luni-solar periods were completed" (Alexander Cunningham, *Book of Indian Eras with tables for calculation Indian dates*, Calcutta, 1883).

accepted without a major problem for many centuries, it began to pose a major problem during the period of English colonization when the end of the cycle seemed closer than ever and the hoped-for liberation from the British yoke would herald in a "new golden age". Indeed, if we were then only at the beginning of the 6th millennium of the Kali-yuga, there were still, according to the Puranic calculations, more than four hundred millennia to go before we emerged from it (432,000 – 5,000 = 427,000)!

It was therefore necessary, at this time and, contrary to the multiplication by 360 proposed by the *Laws of Manu*, to revise this number downwards. That is why many Hindu thinkers or gurus (Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, among many others) applied themselves to coming up with various solutions that were more or less ingenious, and sometimes eccentric, in order to resolve this problem. Guénon thus found himself faced with the same necessity, not for political reasons, but on the one hand due to the clairvoyance of his analysis of the crisis of the modern world, the accuracy of which is still evident three quarters of a century after his death, and, on the other hand, the need to bring the Puranic texts in line with the Abrahamic tradition—and others—which, as we have seen, requires that humanity face an imminent "end of time". In accordance with his idea that the Puranic numbers could have been multiplied artificially in order to "lead astray those who wish to devote themselves to certain calculations" and that only their exact proportions were to be preserved (*ibid*., p. 6), he proposed to reduce the Puranic number of the Kali-yuga from 432,000 years to its hundredth, or 4,320. This number represents a third of the "great year" of the Persians and the Greeks and the latter a fifth of the reign of Xisuthros in Chaldea that Guénon symbolically assimilated to a Manu. He deduced that it was necessary to multiply 4,320 by 15 (= 3 x 5) to obtain the duration of the "*manvantara*" (= *mahāyuga*), which gives 64,800 years for the whole cycle and 6,480 years for the Kali-yuga alone which constitutes a tenth[15] of it.

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[15] Guénon justifies the multiplication of the "great years" by five by establishing a correspondence with the five elements (*bhūta*) which must "necessarily have a special importance from a cosmological point of view", as proven in his eyes by the fact that "one encounters in the ancient traditions of Central America an express association of the elements with certain cyclical periods" (*ibid*., p. 23). It is surprising that he does not refer

He concludes by saying: "... and it will be recognized that these numbers are at least within perfectly plausible limits, and may very well correspond to the true chronology of present terrestrial humanity" (*ibid*., p. 8). However, he refuses to "risk an attempt to determine" the starting point of this cycle, and therefore, incidentally, its end, which he undoubtedly considered contrary to the traditional spirit always respectful of the evangelical (and even Quranic) injunction "For ye know neither the Day nor the Hour" (Matthew 25:13).

It is easy to understand why this assortment of references (to India, Greece, Persia, Chaldea, and Central America) has put off more than one representative of academia! But far from being a random patchwork of allusions, this approach certainly reflected Guénon's acute awareness of the fundamental unity of traditional "forms" the consideration of which is an essential key to his thinking. Finally, the strongest argument of his thesis is the connection, in the wake of certain early English orientalists (Samson Arnold Mackey and Alexander Cunningham, to name the most representative), that Guénon makes between the Puranic numbers and the precession of the equinoxes. This astronomical phenomenon, which sees the vernal point slowly retrograde on the ecliptic, is said to have been discovered and calculated by the Greek astronomer Hipparchus in the 2nd century BC. But it is more than likely that it was known earlier by the Chaldeans—as evidenced by their concept of the "great year" which represents exactly half of one—and even by the Aztecs ("Central America"!) if we are to believe certain modern astronomical atlases. The duration of this cycle is scientifically estimated, from one source to another, in a variable way. Some scholars have put forward the number of 25,769 years, which is equivalent to 99.4% of the value of 25,920 years maintained by tradition.

The precession of the equinoxes was therefore known at the time of the writing of the *Mahābhārata*, at a time when cultural exchanges between Greece, heir to Chaldean calculations, and India are well attested. There is, therefore, no reason to think that the Indians, masterful at astronomy since the Vedic era, did not integrate it into their calculations. The number 25,920 is remarkable in that, like all cosmic

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here to China which, by combining the five elements specific to it with the twelve signs of its zodiac, defines a 60 year cycle well known to astrologers.

cycles (the day and its division into hours,[16] months, years), it corresponds, by means of a symbolic "rounding", to a natural division of the circle based on multiples of 3 (6, 9, 12, 15, etc.). Thus, one degree of the precession of the equinoxes is equivalent to 72 years (25,920:360 = 72).[17] The Puranic number of 4,320 years is therefore obtained from that: 4,320 = 72 x 60; 4,320 x 6 = 25,920, and so on.[18]

It is now necessary to understand that the solution proposed by the "mathematician" Guénon, who used the great year to arrive at an estimate of 6,480 years for the Kali-yuga, is neither unique nor definitive and that he only proposed it as a hypothesis. This is the reason why others after him (Georgel, Phaure, Daniélou, Bolton *et alii*), basing themselves for the most part on his *Remarks*, have multiplied numerical hypotheses in their temporal constructions, including or not the date of 3,102 BC provided by the *Sūrya-siddhānta*. Examining these various attempts would take us too far from our subject and we refer the reader who would like to delve into this to the work of Robert Bolton (*The Order of the Ages: A History of the World in the Light of Cosmogony*, Sophia Perennis, 2001) which is undoubtedly the most rigorous of its kind.

Two points remain to be addressed: Guénon also notes in his article the importance of the number 72 which represents in years, as we have seen, one degree of precession (360 x 72 = 25,920).[19] But he seems to totally ignore the equation 1 *kalpa* = 14 *manvantara* of 71 *mahāyuga* + "a few specks of dust (*sādhikam*: which is exactly 6

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[16] Indians traditionally divide the day into 30 *muhūrta* which represents an interesting alternative to our division into 24 hours (*Laws of Manu*, 1, 64).

[17] Krishna, the Master of Time (*Bhagavad-gītā*, 11, 32) and whose death corresponds mythologically to the beginning of the Kali-yuga, was 36 years old during the Kurukshetra war related by the *Mahābhārata*, and he died at 72 years old. These two periods of 36 years which make up his life refer to the 360 days and 360 nights (= 720) which form a year of Brahmā.

[18] Let us also mention the ingenious architectural key discovered by Stella Kramrish: 64 (= 8 x 8, the basic number of the plan of the Śivaite temples, linked to time) x 81 (= 9 x 9, the basic number of the plan of the Vishnuite temples, linked to space) x 5 (the number of elements) = 25,920, or a complete cycle of the precession of the equinoxes (*The Hindu Temple*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, [1946] 1976, vol. 1, p. 36–37)

[19] Or 71.58 years according to the estimates mentioned above (25,769:360 = 71.58).

mahāyuga, that is to say 0.43 *mahāyuga* for each of the 14 *manvantara*)," and he does not draw the best conclusions from it. This 71.43 (= 1,000:14) shows, however, that by dividing the *kalpa* into 14 *manvantara*, the *Laws of Manu* are in perfect agreement with the astronomical reality of precession,[20] and it therefore seems more difficult to disprove this hypothesis than to admit it.

Finally, dividing the Puranic numbers by 100, as Guénon did, amounts to shortening the "divine years" to a value corresponding to 3.6 human years (and not 360), which contradicts the polar symbolism of the *Laws of Manu*. One may wonder how Guénon would have responded to this objection, had it been put to him.

[20] The "remainder" (*adhika*) of 6 *mahāyugas* that the *Laws of Manu* divide into 15 intermediate periods (*samdhi*) of 1,728,000 years each, amounts to 25,920,000 (= 6 x 4,320,000 or 15 x 1,728,000), which is equivalent to 10 precessions of the equinoxes.